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ABSTRACT

A study explored the perceptions and beliefs of education students regarding identity and diversity. The purpose of the study entailed raising consciousness among white, middle class, conservative students through critical reading, critical listening, debate, cultural analysis, and community service. Students shared their written and oral reactions to selected readings, guest speakers, and performances. Exploring beliefs, conflicting viewpoints, and concerns enabled students to identify personal influences and filters, acknowledge alternatives, and activate change. Confronting racial, class, and gender issues allowed for frank discussion of relevant issues, student-driven course content, and student responsibility for the depth of inquiry, the exchange of ideas, and social agency. Joint and individual culminating projects heightened student synthesis of insights gleaned throughout the semester. Contains 20 references. (Author/BT)

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TITLE: Identity and Diversity: Interrogating beliefs.

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ABSTRACT:

This study explored the perceptions and beliefs of Education students regarding identity and diversity. The purpose of this study entailed raising consciousness among primarily white, middle class, conservative students through critical reading, critical listening, debate, cultural analysis, and community service. Students shared written and oral reactions to selected readings, guest speakers, performances. Exploring beliefs, conflicting viewpoints, and concerns enabled students to identify personal influences and filters, acknowledge alternatives, and activate change. Confronting racial, class, and gender issues allowed for frank discussion of relevant issues, student-driven course content, and student responsibility for the depth of inquiry, the exchange of ideas, and social agency. Joint and individual culminating projects heightened student synthesis of insights gleaned throughout the semester.

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IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY: Interrogating beliefs

What were they thinking? Collegiates who were raising funds for charity by performing lip-synching acts to professional recordings surely had admirable intentions. However, one group chose to use black face, for greater authenticity. Beforehand, the performers had checked with one African-American on campus who did not think there would be a problem. Afterward, not surprisingly, controversy raged. How could anyone expect a single voice to ever speak for an entire people?

This incident which occurred my first year at the college revealed strong campus undercurrents. Teaching in a small, independent, liberal arts college in suburban Pennsylvania contrasted starkly with my New York City roots. Many students held attitudes and opinions based upon limited or no experience of interacting with people of color. How could these students, preparing for public school secondary teaching, truly and equitably serve others if they remained poorly-informed and unaware of their own preconceptions and perceptions?

This event and its aftermath revealed the need to confront underlying beliefs. In subsequent class sessions, students eagerly debated and contested issues. To further the dialogue, I designed a course, the first two semesters of which form the basis for this study.

Purpose

The need for greater awareness of equity and diversity issues has been well-articulated, especially in multicultural, urban contexts; however, the need for heightened sensitivity is crucial among predominantly monocultural settings. This qualitative study explored the perceptions and beliefs of students who enrolled in an elective course, entitled, Identity & Diversity. The purposes of this study included: 1) raising consciousness concerning race, class, and gender issues among predominantly white, middle class, conservative students; and 2) encouraging critical thinking and social activism through community service.

Theoretical framework

Educational research continues to recognize the value of multiple strategies for learning, yet many university and college teachers persist in traditional approaches. Britzman (1991) and Bateman (1990) argued that dialogic discourse activated learners to reconceptualize received ideas and reevaluate opinions. Structured opportunities to examine, express, and compare value systems and consequent actions broaden thinking (Gross, 1996).

As Nieto (1992) delineated, effective multicultural education requires going beyond tolerance, acceptance, and respect, in order to achieve authentic affirmation, solidarity, and critique. West (1993) cautioned against media and social pressures which slanted views, and Greene (1995) promoted aesthetics in developing imaginative solutions for social justice. The struggle for students to stretch parameters and embrace difference proves essential preparation for effective participation in democracy (Giroux, 1992; Rosario, 1994; Novak, 1994).

Methods

This study sought to challenge students to acquire more informed self-knowledge and greater awareness of others - what Banks (1994) called "the transformation approach" and what the Sadkers (1994) championed to counteract Failing at fairness. Critical reading, critical listening, open debate, cultural media, and community service formed the five main components of the course and study.

To analyze and substantiate their beliefs, students were expected to read widely and thoughtfully, generate topics for class discussion, and actively participate in

informed dialogue. They were required to select an unfamiliar cultural medium in which to express insights, and to perform community service to acquire and apply new knowledge in a real life setting. A prepared syllabus suggested topics and readings as a guide, but student interest and choice determined the progress of each session.

To encourage consciousness-raising in thought and action, the course and study demanded that all participants have equal voice. The delicate, affective dimensions of course material required building trust within a genuine community of learners, assuring that all contributions would be accepted. Any challenge had to be intellectual, not personal.

Issues of identity governed the first two weeks of the course, as students analyzed the filters that had shaped their opinions and influenced their perceptions. Students listened to Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech and selected readings from biographical essay collections. They discussed recurrent themes, before writing autobiographies of personal "landscapes of learning," a term well-defined by Maxine Greene (1978).

Read aloud to the class, without judgment or comment, these writings revealed attitudes and lenses.

Topics were loosely divided into three segments, dealing with race, class, and gender; however, the overlapping of issues permeated all course content. Individual inquiry and student-generated discussions governed class sessions, supported by readings, interviews, guest speakers, movies, art, dance, musical and theatrical performances. Students synthesized learning through individually written reflection papers for each of the three categories. They did not read these papers to the class, but compared insights through penetrating discussions. Students selected cultural media through which to express the insights gained from their investigations and community service, documented in final videotaped course projects.

In addition, I wrote copious field notes of class sessions, detailing planned activities for each meeting, the direction and extent of implementation, and the evolution of issues and events. I recorded personal insights regarding the progress of the course, and elicited regular written feedback from students.

Data analysis

As the instructor (participant observer), I studied student writings and class discussions to chart student progress and apply grounded theory (Strauss, 1990) to shape and re-shape course content. Viewing and reviewing videotaped culminating projects reinforced patterns of growth evidenced from the written records throughout each semester. Student final comments and course evaluations recorded their articulation of insights gained throughout each course.

The written and taped data provided a rich source of information from which overriding themes and patterns emerged. The material divided into original intentions and expectations, explicit changes in thinking, and concluding statements and course evaluations.

The two sections of the course differed significantly due to the emphasis on individual interest and choice, as well as the make-up of each group. The first section which centered on gender and ethnic differences was comprised of ten students, all females, two of whom were of East Indian descent. The second section of fifteen students which included three males and three African-

Americans focused more on issues of race and class.

Common readings of Race matters (West, 1993), Reviving Ophelia (Pipher, 1994), and Releasing the imagination (Greene, 1995) challenged students to search for ways to recognize tacit, presupposed knowledge and to devise specific strategies for registering constructive assertions of difference. The War against women (French, 1992) and A Different mirror: a history of multicultural America (Takaki, 1993) provided additional support for investigating accepted knowledge with a more critical eye for historical and political perspectives. Making and molding identity in schools (Davidson, 1996), School girls (Orenstein, 1994), and Gender tales (Kleinfeld & Yerian, 1995) suggested how to heighten awareness of individual needs within the classroom. Apple (1996) amd McLaren (1995) alerted students to the impact and resistance to change practiced by the privileged classes.

The written autobiographies and reflection papers, in both sections, documented initial attitudes and changing concepts; the videotapes of final presentations revealed the extent to which individual horizons had broadened. The two sections formed two case studies.

CASE STUDY 1:

Initial intentions and expectations - In the first meeting, students described their reasons for enrolling in the course. They expressed interest in "recognizing individuals apart from political divisions created through history." They stressed the need to "expose prejudices and stereotypical thinking to eliminate misconceptions." They sought informed "understandings of issues" across campus, beyond the classroom, "to face conflicts and recognize that people make assumptions about others before really knowing them." As one student succinctly stated, "society needs to stop associating negativity and risk with difference."

Autobiographical anecdotes and writings revealed that each student had consciously dealt with discrimination of one form or another before college. Relocating and adjusting to cultures in different countries, surviving ridicule for personal characteristics, confronting death or divorce of parents, and countering extreme differences of opinion among family members had caused them to forge independent thinking, yet seek greater communication amongst people to achieve greater understanding.

Explicitly changing viewpoints - Appearances suggested that these students arrived highly sensitized. However, they often surprised themselves by what they learned from each other. Regarding gender, one student blamed the media for "our culture's preoccupation with the sex appeal and beauty of women," then blamed herself for "succombing to society's ideals." She asserted, "I am now learning to like myself for my inner strengths and abilities." Another student noted "social constructs led to many inequalities and unreal assumptions of differences between men and women." A third recognized that, "we categorize and segregate ourselves in so many ways. As a result, we victimize ourselves."

In terms of ethnicity, students expressed concerns for the complexities within trying to maintain one's "roots," yet "fit in" to the mainstream. One Indian student, a chemistry major, spoke of increased confidence to speak her mind. In conflict with her community - "Although I have immense respect for my culture, I am disheartened by many of its practices," she also coped with prejudices of those in her proposed profession who undercut her accomplishments, claiming her gender and

ethnicity had afforded her favoritism. Others held to family traditions and urged greater awareness and acceptance of customs across cultures.

Students decried "so much history about the human race is absent from our classrooms." They forecasted, "unless knowledge replaces ignorance, youngsters become the adults who are constrained in their comfort zones; they are afraid of rejection by their own kind, and therefore refuse to expand their horizons."

Concluding statements - Community service directed student activism. One student worked with physically and mentally challenged adults, reporting, "I focus on their capabilities, not disabilities, their talents, not weaknesses, their normalness, not abnormalness, and above all, the similarities, not differences, that they share with the rest of the community in which they live." Three students banned together and came to realize that "feeding the homeless in a major city on Friday nights "opened our eyes to the faces of and lives behind them." The class decided to present their final projects as an open campus event, publicizing and organizing the event, in hopes of raising consciousness on a broader scale.

On final course evaluations, students self-reported increased awarenesses of their own thinking and the perspectives of others - "I was provoked to think about issues that affected me but were not known to me." "I am not only more open-minded but have so many different facts and opinions to refer to." One student claimed, "it was challenging because I had to articulate all my ideas in a logical fashion which was really hard sometimes."

CASE STUDY 2:

Initial intentions and expectations - Students came from starkly different home environments. Though most came from comfortable, middle class suburban towns, one student was an equestrian from an affluent family, one experienced reverse discrimination from being a member of the only white family in a black urban community, yet another came from a rural, all-white economically stressed county. Experiences of favoritism or its lack propelled them to take the course, as did rude awakenings wrought by attending college (as the first family member to do so, in some cases).

One black female explained "I look at the world with

a lot less optimism than I used to, because I have endured more evils of the world than I care to even acknowledge." Another female felt compelled to "teach others as well as myself the power of voice and words." A third student "could not imagine living without knowing and loving all sorts of people, from all sorts of backgrounds."

Explicitly changing viewpoints - Extreme differences of opinion among them caused students to focus primarily on race and class issues. One student wrote, "to realize that in today's world people are so blatantly judged by their race was a huge shock...when people are made aware of an issue they can fight against it [racism]." Another stated "Each of the people in this class, through their words, have truly made me, an individual who thinks communication is the key to solving the world's problems, stop and look at everything that is moving around me." A third wrote "we must question why society is arranged in such a class-based way, yet claims it non-existent, and recognize that we, as consumers and middle-class members, must begin to understand that who we are is not determined by what we own."

Concluding statements and evaluations - Student experience broadened through community service. One student wrote, "Being a part of the Habitat experience forced me to see things that words could never make clear." Another wrote, "I learned a great deal about my own identity and the lives of others and how they tie into the world around us."

One student rated the effectiveness of the course, as follows "it challenges and stretches you to go beyond what you know, feel, and are comfortable with." Another wrote, "Everything was presented fairly, and the discussions allowed us to voice our own thoughts, or disagreements, which were always taken well." A third reported, "We shared our opinions and asked a lot of questions. We all took action and went to places that needed us. We grew with the readings and conversations we had with each other in and especially out of class."

Conclusions and Implications

Choice of readings, experiences, and topics for class discussions empowered students to investigate the issues that most mattered to them. Research and personal anecdotes caused students to reconsider controversial

statements made by themselves and others. The accepting atmosphere of the class, insuring that every voice be heard, enabled students to speak frankly and delve deeply into heated issues. Students relished the freedom to share control of touchy subjects and proved responsible in respectfully disagreeing.

Students explored beliefs, conflicting viewpoints, and concerns, enabling them to identify filters, acknowledge possible alternatives, and activate change. The students in both sections exhibited curiosity about diversity, but chose distinctly different avenues to explore issues. The first group began well aware of inequities, from personal experience; they sought and developed specific strategies to enlighten others to the disadvantages to everyone caused by categorizing. The second group had been more sheltered and became more vocal about new awarenesses, both in and out of class (reportedly, often continuing class discussions in the college dining hall and dorms well into the night).

The richness of readings, accompanied by individual choice of at least one cultural medium and community service experience, combined to provoke serious

discussions, relevant applications, and integrated learning. Of their own volition, students in both groups extended their learning experiences to peers on campus.

This study suggests the need to offer courses and opportunities that allow students to make choices within course parameters, to confront real-life complexities, and to resolve issues through social activism. Critical pedagogy prompts students to gain ownership of their beliefs and put those ideas into action.

Relevance leant urgency to topics. Students struggled to express themselves the first few sessions, for fear of sounding foolish or offending others, but shared autobiographies resulted in a genuine bonding that facilitated heartfelt dialogue. Grappling with issues that students faced outside of class caused discussion and actions to spread far beyond classroom limits. The uniqueness of each student gained prominence and respect.

Carry-over from such experiences requires further study. Though both groups felt "transformed" by the open dialogue and consequent enactment of their ideas, studies of the long range effects would indicate whether and how students continued to act upon these sentiments.

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